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Deciding the future of SALT

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Since 1982, the United States and the Soviet Union have been informally observing the limits of the SALT I and II strategic arms limitation agreements. To date, this mutual commitment not to undercut the agreements has had little impact on U.S. strategic forces, plans or actions. But early this fall, when the missile-bearing Trident submarine, the USS Alaska, begins sea trials, the U.S. will exceed the SALT II quantitative limits on multiple-warhead [MIRV] missiles. Unless older missiles of this type are destroyed, the numerical constraints of SALT will dissolve in the wake of the Alaska.

The decision whether to destroy these older missiles, and therefore whether to continue to abide by SALT, is a critical one for arms control.

Opponents of continued adherence have already launched their campaign to dissolve SALT, basing their case on alleged Soviet violations of the unratified treaty. These alleged violations include the testing of two new land-based missiles when only one is allowed, and the encoding of missile performance data broadcast during flight tests. Though these allegations reflect poorly on Soviet good faith, the activities themselves are of marginal strategic significance. Even if the violations prove to have occurred, a more thorough analysis of the basic issues and strategic risks is required before deciding the fate of SALT.

The most important question to be addressed is: Will the U.S. be better off if we and the Soviet Union abandon current policy toward SALT? Clearly, the answer is no. U.S. deployment of the USS Alaska in excess of the SALT II quantitative limits on MIRVed weapons will be taken by the Soviet Union as a justification to breach the numerical limits of SALT.

The Soviets' most likely reaction to the collapse of the SALT II limits will be to continue deployment of new SS-25 mobile missiles without compensating reductions in existing silo-based missile forces. The Soviet Union could then deploy its new, 10-warhead SS-24 mobile missile, probably within the next two years, also without compensating reductions in its silo-based missiles. And the Soviet Union would be capable, by the administration's own claim, of rapidly increasing from 10 to 14 the number of nuclear warheads deployed on its 308 SS-18 heavy missiles. This latter move alone would result in a net gain, within about three years, of 1,200 warheads in the Soviet ICBM force.

The U.S., on the other hand, is scheduled to deploy its land-based MX missile in Minuteman silos, and unless additional silos are built, MX will replace existing missiles in the U.S. force. So although the number of warheads available to the U.S. will grow somewhat, the actual size of the missile force will not. The inevitable result will be to increase quite rapidly and significantly the numbers and capability of the Soviet land-based missile forces relative to our own—the outcome we have sought to avoid, and one all observers agree would reduce our security.

Another unwelcome but not unlikely outcome of abandoning our "no undercut" policy involves the verification provisions of SALT. Although the administration has accused the Soviet Union of violating SALT by encoding flight test data, the U.S. does maintain an array of redundant monitoring capabilities that provide alternate means of obtaining information on Soviet programs. If SALT collapses, the Soviets will be under no obligation to allow these other collection systems unimpeded access to intelligence data. While the Soviets probably will not attempt to interfere directly with U.S. reconnaissance satellites, they could easily adopt a number of camouflage, concealment and deception techniques that are now prohibited by SALT. Such a move, in addition to encoding data, would vastly complicate our intelligence-gathering efforts.

Before making a decision to dissolve SALT and lift the numerical cap on Soviet strategic weapon deployments, the administration needs to make clear why it believes it can deal more successfully with the Soviet threat in the absence of constraints on strategic programs. It needs to clarify how an unverifiable and dramatic increase in strategic weapons can contribute to the goal of overall reductions the United States is seeking in the Geneva arms control negotiations.

It needs to rationalize how a sudden spurt in offensive deployments will place the U.S. in a better position to manage the parlous transition to a nuclear weapon-free world the President has promised to bring about with "Star Wars." And it needs to justify to our military establishment and to Congress how defense planning will be made easier in the absence of predictability in Soviet deployments.

A thoughtful analysis of these questions, not a reflexive desire to "get even" with the evil empire, should be what determines our future course on SALT.

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